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OBSERVATIONS
ON THE
INCREASE
OF
INFIDELITY.

By JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, L.L.D. F.R.S. &c. &c.

When the son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?

LUKE, xviii. 8.

Blessed is he whosoever shall not be offended in me. LUKE, vii. 23.

NORTHUMBERLAND-TOWN, AMERICA, PRINTED.

LONDON:

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1796.

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OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

INCREASE

OF



BY JOSEPH PRIESTLEY, LL.D. F.R.S.

When the use of these compasses, shall be found to be on the earth,
LXXXV, 1791.
It should be observed, that the use of these compasses, shall be found to be on the earth,
LXXXV, 1791.

NORTHUMBRIA AND TOWN, AMERICA, PRINTED.

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1791.

[The following are the names of the persons who have been employed in the printing of this work.]

THE PREFACE.

THESE observations on the causes of the great progress which infidelity has lately made, and is still making, and which were originally prefixed to the American edition of my *Letters to the Philosophers and Politicians of France*, I have here much enlarged, and printed separately. Indeed, they are more proper for the perusal of *christians* than of *unbelievers*; being more immediately calculated to give them satisfaction with respect to a prospect which must continually present itself to their minds, and which cannot but at first view appear a very melancholy one. I shall think myself happy, if I be able, in this work, to address myself to believers, or, in my other writings, to unbelievers, with propriety and effect.

If I be asked why I write so much as I do on the subject of the *evidence of christianity*, (for many

of my publications relate to it), I answer, that both its infinite importance, and the extraordinary crisis of the times, call for it, from every person, who conceives that he has any prospect of being heard and attended to. There is no subject whatever with respect to which I am more fully satisfied myself; and few persons, I imagine, will pretend that they have given so much attention to it as I have done. It does not, however, follow from this circumstance, that I have viewed it in every possible light; and, that others may not discover, what I have overlooked. I have therefore wished to promote the most free and open discussion of it, and have not failed to invite, nay to provoke, this examination on every proper occasion.

- When, however, we have done all that we can, we must leave the event to a wise providence, whose instruments we are, and which has, no doubt, the best ends to answer both by the promulgation of christianity, and the present remarkable progress of infidelity. And believing this, we should not, after doing what we conceive to be our duty, make ourselves unhappy; though,

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influenced as we necessarily are, by the objects that are nearest to us, it must give pain to every zealous christian to see so many persons, for whose intellectual and moral improvement, and for whose welfare, he is concerned, and of whom he may think very highly in other respects, carried away by the torrent, which he sees to sweep before it every principle that he feels to be most valuable and useful to himself; leaving them mere worldly-minded beings, instead of heavenly-minded, bounding their prospects by the grave, when his own most pleasing prospects are beyond it.

When I read the scriptures, in which I have increasing satisfaction as I advance in life, the animating accounts which there abound of the perfections and providence of God, extending to all the affairs of individual men, as well as those of states and kingdoms, and especially the glorious prospects that are there given us of the future state of things in the world, with respect to the great events which seem now to be approaching, and the light that is thrown over the state beyond the grave, so encouraging to every virtuous endeavour, I cannot help wishing that all

persons might partake with me in them, and I feel the most sensible concern for those who cannot do it. Unbelievers cannot have that solid consolation that christians have under all the troubles of life, especially those that are endured for the sake of a good conscience, arising from the persuasion that *all things are working together for their good*, if not here, yet assuredly hereafter. Least of all can the unbeliever, at the approach of death, sing the triumphant song of the christian, *O grave, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?*

As the language of scripture will be uncouth to most unbelievers, who are little acquainted with it, I shall, for the sake of my philosophical friends, who cannot but approve, and admire, *Hartley's Theory of the Mind*, but who content themselves with studying *only* his first volume, quote two pages from his second, the beginning and the close of it; hoping that, if they be not wholly destitute of serious impressions, prejudiced as they may be against religion, they will perceive something great, and truly valuable, in the feelings of a man who could write as he does.

“Whatever be our doubts, fears, or anxieties,

“whether

“ whether selfish or social, whether for time or
“ eternity, our only hope and refuge must be in
“ the infinite power, knowledge, and goodness of
“ God. And if these be really our hope and
“ refuge, if we have a true practical sense and
“ conviction of God’s infinite ability, and readi-
“ ness, to protect and bless us, an entire, peaceful
“ and happy resignation will be the result, not-
“ withstanding the clouds and perplexities
“ wherewith we may sometimes be encompassed.
“ He who has brought us into this state will
“ conduct us through it. He knows all our
“ wants and distresses. His infinite nature will
“ bear down all opposition from our impotence,
“ ignorance, vice, or misery. He is our creator,
“ judge, and king; our friend, and father, and
“ God. And though the transcendant greatness
“ and gloriousness of this prospect may at first
“ view make our faith stagger, and incline us to
“ disbelieve through joy, yet, upon farther con-
“ sideration, it seems rather to confirm and
“ establish itself on that account. For the more
“ it exceeds our gratitude and comprehension,
“ the more does it coincide with the idea of that

“ absolutely perfect being, which the several
“ orders of imperfect beings perpetually suggest
“ to us, as our only resting-place, the cause of
“ causes, and the supreme reality.”

He concludes his great work as follows: “ I
“ have now gone through with my observations
“ on the frame, duty, and expectations of man;
“ finishing them with the doctrine of ultimate un-
“ limited happiness to all. This doctrine, if it
“ be true, ought at once to dispel all gloominess,
“ anxiety, and sorrow from our hearts, and raise
“ them to the highest pitch of love, adoration,
“ and gratitude, towards God, our most bountiful
“ creator, and merciful father, and the inexhaust-
“ ible source of happiness and perfection. Here
“ self interest, benevolence, and piety, all concur
“ to move and exalt our affections. How happy
“ in himself, how benevolent to others, and how
“ thankful to God, ought that man to be who
“ believes both himself and others born to an in-
“ finite expectation! Since God has bid us
“ rejoice, what can make us sorrowful? Since
“ he has created us for happiness, what misery
“ can we fear? If we be really intended for
“ ul-

“ ultimate unlimited happiness, it is no matter
“ to a truly resigned person, when, or where, or
“ how. Nay, could any of us fully conceive,
“ and be duly influenced by this glorious expect-
“ ation, this infinite balance in our favour, it
“ would be sufficient to deprive all present evils
“ of their sting and bitterness. It would be a
“ sufficient answer to all our difficulties and anxie-
“ ties from the folly, vice, and misery, which we
“ experience in ourselves, and see in others, to say
“ that they will end in unbounded knowledge,
“ virtue, and happiness; and that the progress of
“ every individual, in his passage through an eter-
“ nal life, is from imperfect to perfect, particular
“ to general, less to greater, finite to infinite, and
“ from the creature to the creator.”

It must certainly be something of great and of real value that could dictate such sentiments as these. If it be a delusion, it is sublime and elevating. But those who are acquainted with the writer's theory of the mind, will be sensible that the sentiments are as agreeable to true philosophy, as they are to religion; though nothing but religion could have suggested them.

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What is most to be apprehended is, that many persons have conceived so fixed an aversion to every thing that bears the name of *religion*, most interesting as, in its own nature, it must necessarily be, that they will not read, or give the least attention to, any thing relating to it. To address such persons on the subject is, of course, altogether in vain. But there are others, and I hope not a few, who will think it worth their while to inquire whether there be an *hereafter* for them, or not; whether they shall survive the grave or not; and who may conceive, that the question is not a matter of indifference to them, with respect to the conduct or the happiness of their lives here. Among such persons I may hope to find some readers.

Great as is the increase of infidelity in the present age, and even, as I am informed, in this country, I cannot help flattering myself that it will not be so extensive here, as on the continent of Europe; because a great cause of its increase in those countries is the establishment of a very corrupt system of christianity in them. Absurdity, supported by power, will never be able to stand

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its ground against the efforts of reason. What is manifestly contrary to natural reason, *cannot* be received by it; and the bulk of mankind will not take the pains to distinguish between the different parts of a system that are equally forced upon them. Filled with indignation, they will reject the whole.

But happily, in this country the *church* has no alliance with the *state*, every person being allowed to worship God in whatever manner he pleases, or not to worship him at all, if he be not so disposed, without being exposed to any civil inconvenience. In these circumstances, truth has the best chance of being heard, and of recommending itself; and nothing is wanting to the universal reception of pure christianity, but a candid attention to it, if, as I doubt not, it be founded in truth. Absurd doctrines being held by the majority of a people will, indeed, disgust many intelligent persons. But the liberty of preaching and publishing being uncontrolled, it will in time appear that christianity is not answerable for those absurdities. Its real nature will sooner or later be understood, and its evidences will be

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attended to, and this is all that its most zealous friends can desire. From reasonable men, truth requires nothing but a patient and candid hearing. In this respect, the last age had the advantage of the present. At the time of the reformation from popery, and for more than a century afterwards, the subject of religion obtruded itself upon all ranks of men, the scriptures were read with avidity, and the contents of them were the subjects of general conversation; and with such writings all who could read, thought it necessary to be acquainted. In these circumstances there were few unbelievers; and whenever the time shall come, that the scriptures shall be much and seriously read, it is, I will venture to say, impossible there should be many. The internal evidences of their divine authority are so numerous, and striking, that it is hardly possible but that men's minds must perceive and be impressed by them. The history of the miracles of Moses, and of Jesus, are delivered with such simplicity, that, even without taking into consideration the effects they produced at the time, they strike with the force of truth.

I shall

I shall think myself happy, if, by means of writing, preaching, or conversation, I can in any degree draw this requisite degree of attention to the scriptures, and the evidence of christianity; or prepare the way for it, by exposing those monstrous corruptions and abuses of the christian religion, which contribute so much to prejudice the minds of sensible men against it, and indispose them to attend to any thing relating to it.

I don't think any of us can in any writing, preaching, or conversation, I can in any degree draw this requisite degree of attention to the scriptures, and the evidence of Christianity; or prepare the way for it, by exposing those monstrous corruptions and abuses which contribute so much to prejudice the minds of sensible men against it, and induce them to attend to any thing relating to it.

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ON THE

OBSERVATIONS

ON THE INCREASE OF INFIDELITY.

SECTION I.

OF DIFFERENT PERSONS FORMING DIFFERENT JUDGMENTS OF THINGS.

BELIEVERS and unbelievers in christianity are equally interested in the solution of one problem, viz. on what principles the opinions of their opponents are founded. For they must both allow that their adversaries are *men*, as well as themselves; and therefore that their minds are equally subject to the same general laws, by which human nature is universally governed. Unbelievers, not being able to deny the fact, of the speedy and extensive propagation of christianity, immediately after the death and supposed

resurrection of Jesus, when both jews and gentiles were hostile to it, and when the believers were exposed to all kinds of hardships, in consequence of their belief, must have some method of satisfying themselves how this took place, on the supposition of the history of the miracles and resurrection of Christ not being true. The christian also must account for the want of the immediate and universal reception of his religion at that time, and of the absolute rejection of it by many intelligent, and some very worthy persons, in all christian countries, at the present day. For this, also, is a fact that cannot be denied, and therefore requires to be accounted for. Having endeavoured, in my former publications, especially my *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever*, to account for the non-reception of christianity by many persons at the time of its promulgation, I shall in the present essay have a more particular view to the rejection of it by unbelievers, and especially philosophical ones, at this day.

To a person who himself entertains no doubt of the truth of revelation, the present prevalence of infidelity becomes the subject
of

of a serious and interesting inquiry. We naturally think that the evidence which appears satisfactory to us, must appear so to all other persons; men being constituted alike, and consequently receiving the same impressions from the same objects.

This, indeed, is strictly true with respect to the ideas of *number* and *quantity*. For to them all minds are in the same state; and therefore to all persons *three* must ever appear more than *two*, and exactly the half of *six*: and no person acquainted with the definitions of terms in geometry can possibly deny that the *three angles of a right-angled triangle are equal to two right angles*. But with respect to propositions which do not admit of this kind of evidence, (which depends upon the *coincidence of ideas*, or shewing that under different names the same things are comprehended), different minds may be very differently predisposed, so that the same object will not make the same impression, nor will the same evidence give the same satisfaction.

On the subject of religion, politics, or any thing else that is equally interesting to us, we daily see that the same arguments are very

differently received by different persons. The books of Scripture are equally open to all persons, and all sects of christians profess to derive their doctrines from them. But how much do they differ from each other? And though all ancient documents are equally read by the advocates for the original freedom, or the original despotism, of the English constitution, how different are their conclusions?

How different are the opinions that have been, and still are, formed by the readers of the same histories, of the characters of Cicero and Cæsar, of the merit or demerit of Charles I. of England, and of the principles of the American and French revolutions? And, in the middle ages, how differently did men think with respect to the question which agitated the whole of Christendom concerning the validity of the popes at Rome or at Avignon, when all the facts, on which their judgments were formed, were equally before all the parties?

But, what is more to my purpose, different persons, according to their different circumstances and dispositions, will entertain very different opinions concerning the probability or improbability, the truth or the falsehood,

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of *facts*. Of this we had a remarkable instance in England, at the time of the invasion of France by the duke of Brunswick and the king of Prussia; some persons being confident that they had completely defeated the French army, and were on their march to Paris, and others seeing no reason to believe any such thing. And even after the retreat took place, it was a long time before the friends of government would give the least credit to it: and yet both parties had the very same intelligence.

Besides this, there are causes of assent to propositions wholly independent of any proper *evidence* presented to the mind itself; so that we may be led to presume that there is sufficient evidence, though we do not ourselves perceive it. We are more especially in danger of being misled by specious *analogies*, and superficial but fixed *maxims* grounded on such analogies. These will, with many persons, even prevent any attention being given to proper evidence; so that, though it be in itself abundantly satisfactory to the candid and attentive, it is impossible that it should have any effect upon others.

On these accounts, truths of an historical nature are liable to be received very differently by different persons; and there is such a number of circumstances to be attended to in order to form a right judgment, that a small difference in the previous state of mind will have a great effect, as to the impression that the same evidence will make; so that different persons, having different ideas with respect to the previous probability or improbability of a fact, and also of the competency or incompetency of the evidence, may draw even contrary conclusions from the same report; one thinking it to be certainly true, and acting upon that idea, and another regarding it as unquestionably false, and, in his conduct, wholly uninfluenced by it.

It may, I think, be said with truth, that the greater part of mankind form their opinions on most subjects, even those of the greatest importance, not on any evidence which themselves have considered, but, in a great measure, from the opinions of other persons, of whose judgment they have, by one means or other, been led to think very highly.

highly. Thus children, confiding in the judgment and affection of their parents, which they think has seldom, if ever, misled them, in general adopt implicitly whatever faith, or practice, comes recommended to them by their authority. It is by this means, no doubt, that the children of jews are almost universally of the jewish religion, those of mahometans mahometans, those of christians christians, those of quakers quakers, &c. &c. Had they formed their opinions from any evidence present to their own minds, the probability would have been, that, in all the cases, a much greater proportion of the children would have been of some religious persuasion different from that of their parents; because it was only one of a great number.

In like manner, if a person have by any means been led to form a high opinion of the sagacity and judgment of other persons, though not his parents or tutors, he will be apt to adopt their opinions, without any examination of his own. And this is evidently the case with the generality of unbelievers as well as of other classes of men, few of whom

will even pretend to have taken the requisite pains to form a judgment for themselves, or indeed to have that acquaintance with ancient history, and other branches of knowledge, which is necessary for the purpose.

They see many men universally celebrated for their genius, as Voltaire, Rousseau, Hume, and Franklin, to be unbelievers; and having, withal, other reasons to be disinclined to the belief of christianity, they persuade themselves that such men as these could not have become unbelievers without sufficient reason, and therefore think they cannot do wrong to rank with them, and readily join them in their ridicule of religion, and of the scriptures, of which they have perhaps seen nothing but in the writings of other unbelievers, and especially the passages most open to misrepresentation. It appears to them more reputable to class with men of such superior understandings, rather than with the bulk of mankind, who retain that regard for religion which they received from their ancestors; the generality of religious persons being, it must be acknowledged, of this class. These, therefore, they are apt to hold in contempt, and, from the

the principle of association, the religion which they profess.

On such principles as these, or others no better founded, a person who believes, and, as he doubts not, on solid ground, that christianity is true, must account for other persons believing it to be false.

SECTION II.

OF THE INFLUENCE WHICH THE BELIEF OF NATURAL RELIGION, AND MORAL CHARACTER, HAVE IN THE RECEPTION OR REJECTION OF CHRISTIANITY.

THERE is a necessary connexion between *natural* and *revealed* religion. For the mission of Christ, if his pretensions were well founded, was from God, the author of nature, and proceeded from his good-will to his offspring of mankind. And when the mind is strongly impressed with the belief of the existence and perfections of God, of his constant presence, and moral government, the

the idea of his intercourse with men, by means of miracles and revelation, in order to give them the information they want concerning their duty here, and their expectations hereafter, will appear easy, natural, and desirable, and consequently will be favourably attended to.

But when, from the want of a sense of religion, ideas of God, of his goodness, and moral government, never occur to the mind, there cannot be any expectation, wish, or desire of a revelation; and the more completely this irreligious state of mind is impressed on any persons, the more improbable will every thing relating to the evidences of revelation appear; so that it will be with great difficulty, if at all, that they can be brought to give sufficient attention to them. What, then, can be our expectation of such persons, whether nominal or only practical atheists, becoming christians? To persons whose thoughts never go beyond the visible course of nature, who have no faith in a wise and benevolent *author of nature*, nothing will appear more improbable than the account of any deviation from it; so that no evidence
whatever

whatever will weigh with them in favour of it. Nay, for want of similar feelings on the subject, they can hardly be persuaded but that all persons, of whose understandings they have a good opinion, think as they do with respect to it. "We judge," says Dr. Hartley (*Observations on Man*, vol. ii. p. 319), "of the frame of other men's minds by that of our own, as appears from the theory of association; and whatever differs in a great degree from our own, puts on the appearance of something romantic and incredible." Treating of the love of God, he says, *ib.* p. 325, "It passes all belief of those who have not experienced it; so that they look upon all the discourses and writings of those who have, to be either hypocrisy, or romantic jargon."

Considering the near relation that the precepts and the sanctions of revelation bear to moral duties, it is impossible but that the previous disposition of mind with respect to morality must have considerable influence on the predisposition to receive or to reject it. And a circumstance which secretly, though not avowedly, adds to the difficulty of the

cordial

cordial reception of christianity, is, that it is by no means a system of mere speculative truth, but is intimately connected with the inward temper of mind, and the conduct of life. And both the disposition of mind and the practice required by christianity, are such as men accustomed to the ways of the world, and whose modes of thinking and acting have been formed by them (not excepting even many persons of a philosophical and speculative turn), cannot easily adopt, and reconcile themselves to.

That peculiar meekness and passiveness of disposition, which is essential to the christian character, though it be intimately connected with benevolence, is not that which makes a man appear to the most advantage in the eyes of the generality of mankind. On the contrary, a high spirit, and a promptness to resent injuries, which is condemned by christianity, much more effectually recommends men to general esteem; and it is at the same time a much more easy attainment, as it requires much less force and comprehension of mind, less self-command, and less government of the passions.

To

To preserve this equal temper of mind, in the promiscuous commerce of the world, requires constant vigilance, and must subject a man to many mortifications. For notwithstanding the real superiority of the truly christian character to that of the men of the world, it will not be apparent to those who have no experience, feeling, or comprehension of it. Nay, this or any other account of it will rather tend to fill them with contempt and aversion for it. Yet, that it would be happy for the world if the meek and benevolent spirit of the goipel was universal, cannot be doubted. For certainly the man who is disposed to forgive an injury, would not voluntarily inflict one. The prevalence of this spirit would, therefore, be the reign of peace and good-will. And to what must we ascribe the wars, and other evils, that have desolated the world, and filled it with misery, but the prevalence of an opposite spirit?

Men of the world being far more numerous than the meek, the pious, and the heavenly-minded christians, these must expect to be treated with ridicule, as superstitious and weak-minded persons; and they may think themselves

selves happy if they escape the effects of real hatred and malevolence. This may be expected as much from men of genius and philosophers as from any others. Nay, the pride of understanding often leads such persons to treat those who think differently from them with peculiar contempt. But this is what our Saviour particularly apprized us of when he observed (John, xv. 19), that *the world will love its own; and because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you.* He adds, for our encouragement (ch. xvi. 33), *but it hated me before it hated you; and be of good cheer; I have overcome the world*.*

Moreover, a christian, a person who imbibes, and is habitually actuated by, the genuine spirit of his religion, considering himself as a candidate for immortality, and giving an infinite preference to a heavenly inheritance above any thing that this world can promise him, will, in his coolest and happiest moments, be always directing his thoughts upwards, having his *affections*, as the apostle

* How unlike is this language to that of an impostor!

says,

says, placed on *heaven and heavenly things*; which, as it marks a character totally different from that of the world (of those who, having no other objects, *set their affections on things below*), must be, on that account, difficult to maintain, every thing they see calling them one way, and their christian principles another; so that they will live in the world as *strangers and pilgrims*; and they will accordingly ever hold themselves ready to abandon every enjoyment in this life, and even life itself, rather than, by violating the dictates of their consciences, forfeit their title to that which they justly consider as better than life.

As the chief attention of men will be drawn to those objects which they hold dearest to them, a christian will spend much of his time in reading and meditating upon the scriptures, as the books which alone contain authentic records of the various dispensations of God to mankind, and especially that of christianity, which *brings life and immortality to light*. The genuine expressions of piety and benevolence in the writers of those books, unequalled by any thing that we perceive

ceive traces of in other compositions, will continually warm his heart, and impart new satisfaction on every perusal. By this means he will catch the same spirit; and a fixed sense of the presence and providence of God will inspire his mind with the sentiments of habitual devotion, which cannot be without the most diffusive benevolence, and the deepest humility.

In fact, the principles of christianity, duly impressed, will make a man what the scriptures emphatically and justly call *a new creature*, in many respects the reverse of the men of the world; and in proportion to the difference of character, and its superiority, must be the apprehended difficulty of attaining it. And every attainment apprehended to be above our reach, or which we are not willing to be at the pains to acquire, will be viewed with envy and dislike. Hence arises an almost invincible prejudice in the minds of men occupied with the business and pleasures of the world to those principles which would lead them off from them, and engage them in pursuits of an opposite nature.

The spirit and maxims of christianity will
lead

lead men to make an open profession of their faith in every mode that they shall think most proper to make it known, respected, and embraced. It is what the obligation every man is under to do all the good in his power, and to extend the blessings that he possesses to others, absolutely requires of him. He will, therefore, think it his duty to attend public worship, and in general to give his countenance to every thing that has the propagation of the gospel in its purity for its object. Now, an unbeliever, who has not been accustomed to any thing of the kind, will feel an almost insuperable repugnance to these things, and consequently will view with great prejudice whatever would lay him under such a disagreeable obligation.

Great, indeed, must have been the power of truth, and peculiarly strong its evidence, when christianity at its first promulgation produced greater changes than even these. For nothing could be more opposite than the prevailing sentiments and habits of the heathens, and those of the primitive christians. But then it was aided by *recent miracles*, a kind of evidence which, where it

was duly attended to, could not be withstood. Indeed, the difficulty with which the belief of christianity keeps its ground at present, when externally every thing favours it, is a proof that there must have been something very different in the circumstances of its first promulgation, when, though every thing that can be named was hostile to it, it established itself, to the overthrow of heathenism, and every thing else that stood in its way.

At this time the belief of christianity requires *attention* to the accounts of miracles wrought in former times. The evidence does not *obtrude* itself upon men; and therefore, their prejudices and habits indisposing them to give this attention, such changes are not to be expected. We must, therefore, be content if a few only of the more inquisitive and candid, and in other respects the best disposed, of unbelievers, be induced to embrace christianity, and live according to it; and if their example influence a few others, who, without much examination of their own, will feel themselves prejudiced in favour of what has gained the approbation of those whose judgment they have been led to respect;

respect ; or oftentimes, if, without making converts, we can strengthen the faith, and improve the sentiments and conduct, of some who are already christians.

That the great and extensive views of christianity do tend to elevate and purify the mind, and that the narrow views of unbelievers tend to depress and debase it, is evident from the best ascertained theory of the formation of the intellectual sentiments. Unbelievers, having no views beyond the present life, will naturally be desirous of making the most of its enjoyments, and be unwilling to deny themselves any of those gratifications, which in their opinion make life desirable. Hence great numbers give themselves up, as far as they can, without restraint to sensual enjoyments. They are, indeed, destitute of those religious principles which we find to be so necessary, especially in youth, to restrain the irregular indulgence of the natural passions. And the necessary consequence of this indulgence (to say nothing of the more manifest evils to which it leads) is a great debasement of our rational nature. For though, as Hartley observes, vol. ii. p. 213,

“ the sensible pleasures are the first of which
“ we are capable, and the foundation of the
“ intellectual ones, according to the law of
“ association ;” yet, p. 212, “ it is in our
“ power, by an inordinate pursuit of them,
“ to convert the mental affections into
“ sources of pain, and to impair and cut off
“ many of the intellectual pleasures ; so
“ that the balance shall be against us on the
“ whole.” And, as he says, p. 214, “ the
“ great business and purport of the present
“ life is the transformation of sensuality into
“ spirituality, by associating the sensible plea-
“ sures, and their traces, with proper foreign
“ objects.”

As the views of unbelievers, so their general maxims of conduct, will be different from those of christians. Unbelievers feeling no interest in any thing beyond this life, their present happiness will not only be the great object of their pursuit, but a regard to it will be the foundation of their *moral principles*. To this they will, and must, refer every thing ; and their love of others, of their country, and of mankind, will be no farther regarded by them than as it tends to promote
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their own happiness. Consequently, though, from the effect of a better education, of good early habits, or of emulation, they may be led to overlook their individual interest, and become even enthusiastically patriotic, they cannot be so from cool reflection; and therefore their generosity and public spirit cannot be absolutely depended upon; nor can they arrive at that dignity and elevation of mind, which, with his best judgment, carries the christian wholly out of himself in the great pursuits of disinterested benevolence, a regard to the will of God, and to conscience, which Hartley describes as the greatest attainment of man, his greatest perfection and happiness.

The unbeliever in a future state will naturally think that the demands of the public upon him have their limits, and that he is not bound to do more for his country than his country does for him. Whereas the christian considers the demands of all, to whom it is in his power to render any service, as having no limits but those of the power itself. According to the generous and exalted principles of christianity, we are, like our Saviour, even to lay down our lives, not
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only for our friends, but for our enemies, hoping for our recompence *at the resurrection of the just*.

The lower pursuits of our nature are checked by the principle of self-interest. But these are designed to be only a means to the great objects above mentioned, and become gradually absorbed and lost in them, just as an express regard to other *means* is lost in the contemplation of their proper *ends*. It is the natural tendency of the principle of association, which is the great law of our intellectual nature, to bring men to this state, which Hartley calls *self-annihilation*. And if our existence, under such influences as we are now exposed to, be continued a sufficient length of time, all men will arrive at it. But this progress may be accelerated, or retarded, by our attention to, or neglect of, the proper discipline of the mind. They who purposely turn their attention from the consideration of God, and his providence, respecting the present and future condition of man, as discovered to us by revelation, will be thrown back in this intellectual course, till, in some new situation, some more severe dis-

discipline shall force them into it again; while they who exert themselves to cultivate a sense of piety to God, and never lose sight of the great views of things opened to us in the scriptures; will proceed towards the great end of their being, with a constant and accelerated progress *.

Another source of real dignity and greatness of mind in a manner peculiar to believers in revelation, is piety, a lively sense of the constant presence, the providence, and moral government of God, inspiring a deep reverence even for his name, and naturally leading to that intercourse with him, mental or vocal, which we term *prayer*. If frequent commerce with great men, and the contempla-

* I cannot help observing in this place, that the coincidence of the great precepts of christianity, *the love of God above all*, and *the love of our neighbour as ourselves*, with the ultimate tendency of our natures, as demonstrated by Hartley on the principle of the association of ideas, is a strong argument in favour of revelation. How came men so illiterate, and so ignorant in other respects, as the writers of the books of scripture, to hit upon sentiments so just and sublime, and so much superior to any that were known to the greatest philosophers in ancient times?

tion of great objects, tend to elevate the mind, the same cannot but be the effect of this constant intercourse with the greatest and best of beings, of, as it were, seeing God in every thing, and every thing in God.

On the other hand, unbelievers, having no faith in such an intimate intercourse as the history of revelation represents the author of nature keeping up with mankind, or in his great and benevolent designs respecting them, will not, at least will not easily or generally, give much attention to him, though they should not absolutely deny his existence ; so that they will have no great restraint on their minds from lightly profaning his name, in the low habits of cursing and swearing, and will not think such practices to be sinful ; and they will laugh at the idea of *prayer*. By these means, however, their minds become insensibly debased ; and whatever be their intellectual attainments in other respects, their affections will be low and groveling. A man cannot have any reverence for a being who is not the object of his frequent and respectful attention.

If there be any truth in this account of the

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superiority of the truly christian character above that of those who look no farther than the present life ; as the latter, from its being wholly remote from their ideas, will not have any just conception of it, the *religious principles* which tend to form it will be regarded with prejudice by them ; and instead of admiring them, they may appear an object of dislike, and even of ridicule ; just as ignorant persons are apt to dislike and ridicule the manners of foreigners, though more polished than their own, and in all respects superior to them. Even persons who have been educated in the belief of christianity may by degrees contract this unfavourable state of mind with respect to it.

The effect of discontinuing to read the scriptures, though some knowledge of them might have been acquired in early life, the never hearing them mentioned in serious conversation, and not attending any public worship, will be, that the impression made by the early reading of them will grow fainter and fainter, and at length will wholly disappear ; and all respect for them will vanish. If, then, in the course of conversation with unbelievers,

lievers, and the frequent reading of their writings, only those parts of the scriptures be mentioned, which, singly taken, are most liable to ridicule, a contempt for the whole will be generated; and the evidence of revelation not having been properly studied, or impressed on the mind, infidelity will be the unavoidable consequence. This will be more especially the case with young persons in the gayer circles of life, who are not themselves distinguished for their mental ability, but who are apt to look up to those that are, and are too ready to join with them in a contempt for the opinions and practices of the vulgar.

It is very possible, from the force of the prejudice, which, arising in this manner, indisposes the mind to every thing that bears the name of *religion*, that the very mention of Balaam's ass, or Jonah's whale, shall be sufficient to give them an invincible disgust to every thing connected with them, and wholly prevent their giving any proper attention to the general evidence of the great facts on which the system of revelation is founded; though, when duly considered, it would infinitely

initely overpower much greater objections than can arise from such circumstances as these.

But the strongest prejudice against christianity will flow from an addictedness to those vices which revelation prohibits. Men who are not strictly virtuous, and who know that every violation of the laws of virtue is an offence against religion, will, whether they will confess it or not, or, indeed, whether they attend to it or not, be impressed with a secret dislike of the subject, and will therefore gladly avail themselves of any excuse for giving no attention to it. This must be the case with all young men who have been accustomed to profane swearing, or to that commerce of the sexes, and other practices, which christianity condemns. And not seeing the immediate bad consequences of those practices, they often will not allow them to be vices, and even find a handle against christianity for making them to be such.

This subject receives great light from Dr. Hartley's doctrine of *rational and practical assent*, which he justly observes, "reciprocally influence each other;" from which he infers (vol. i. p. 333), that "vicious men,
" that

“ that is, all persons who want practical
“ faith, must be prejudiced against the histo-
“ rical and other evidences of revealed reli-
“ gion.” If the practical assent generate the
rational, so that, as he observes, p. 332,
“ the sanguine are apt to assert and believe
“ what they hope,” they who are with re-
spect to revelation in a state of mind the
reverse of sanguine, or previously disinclined
to believe, will be apt to assert and believe the
incredibility and falsehood of it, be its evi-
dences in themselves ever so satisfactory.

“ Practical atheism, or that neglect of
“ God, where the person thinks of him sel-
“ dom, and with reluctance, and pays little
“ or no regard to him in his actions, though
“ he does not deny him in words, as well
“ as speculative atheism,” he farther says,
vol. i. p. 492, “ proceeds from an explicit
“ or implicit sense of guilt, and consequently
“ a fear of God, sufficient to generate an
“ aversion to the thoughts of him, and the
“ methods by which the love of him might
“ be generated, and yet too feeble to restrain
“ from guilt.”

A dislike to the subject of religion, gene-
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rated from these and other causes, will operate even to the extinction of all liberal curiosity with respect to it. I cannot in any other way account for that extreme ignorance of the scriptures which is to be found among many well-educated persons in England, and other christian countries. The bible is not read in genteel schools, or in families; and though it consists of the most ancient of all writings, and on other accounts would naturally invite the study of the curious, great numbers of persons who have even had a liberal education are unable to give any account of their general contents*.

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* The following instance of the extreme ignorance of the scriptures in a person of whom more knowledge of them might have been expected, may serve both to amuse and to instruct my readers. Being one time in company with Dr. Franklin, and a person now dead, but of considerable genius and a literary turn, brother to an English nobleman now living, being introduced, he turned the conversation upon the subject of the simplicity and beauty of the Oriental style of composition; and to exemplify his observations, he took down his bible, and opening it, seemed to read, but really repeated *memoriter*, that chapter which he had himself composed from an old Jewish tradition concerning Abraham. This the gentleman, not
doubting

Can it then be thought extraordinary, that, thus ignorant, and prejudiced as they are

doubting but that it was a real chapter in the bible, expressed himself much pleased with. On this the Doctor smiled, and the gentleman perceiving that he had been taken in, was a little mortified. However, to try him a little farther, the Doctor took the bible again, and read the first chapter of the book of Job, which the gentleman also expressed himself much pleased with, but said it was no more a part of the bible than the other. The Doctor then shewed him the bible, and said he might read it himself. But even this did not satisfy him. He said it might be a book of his own printing, and no real bible at all.

The Doctor had before observed to me, that one species of profaneness was now extinct, which was ridiculing the scriptures; because they were no longer read by such persons as were used to take that liberty with them.

Dr. Franklin himself acknowledged to me that he had not given so much attention to the evidence of christianity as the subject required, and desired me to recommend to him a few treatises (but he added of no great length) on the subject; promising to read them with care, and to give me his opinion of them. Accordingly, I named to him that part of Dr. *Hartley's Observations on Man*, which treats of the evidence of revelation, and a work of my own, which he said he would read. But the American war breaking out, and he leaving England presently after this, I do not know whether he ever read them or not. Nor, indeed, do I know that he died an unbeliever.

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against religion in general, they should not be believers? They want the necessary elements of christian faith, *viz.* a knowledge of the facts on which it is founded, having only such a knowledge as is acquired by hearing them ridiculed. In the same situation, they might have been unbelievers in any other history. They might think the Greek and Roman histories to be incredible, and come to smile at them, as they do at that of the jews and of Jesus.

Inattention to the subject of religion, however generated, naturally leads to infidelity; and much intercourse with the world, the busy or the gay, the political, the commercial, or the philosophical, as it is now conducted, tends to produce this inattention. In this case the mind is wholly occupied with things foreign to religion. It never becomes the subject of conversation, and there not being in the mind any ideas that have affections with it, it will not easily occur even to a man's private thoughts. When this is the case, whether men be nominally unbelievers in christianity or not, they will be no better for it, as it cannot have any influence on their thoughts,

thoughts, words, or actions. It will not at all contribute to form the *character*, or give a turn to their sentiments. Their minds are so wholly engrossed by the things of this world, that they never raise their views above them. They have no hopes or wishes respecting a future world, and therefore cannot be prepared to make any sacrifices to the consideration of it.

This inattention to religion has of late years been increasing, and is now become very general. In France and other popish countries, religion has never been any serious object to men of the world; and whenever it has obtruded itself upon their notice, it has been in some form that could not command their respect, but rather excite their contempt and disgust. Can we wonder, then, at the general prevalence of infidelity in France, and other countries similarly situated in that respect?

It may be said, and with some appearance of reason, that if some persons be biased against the evidences of revelation, others will be no less biased in favour of them. A good man, who hopes that a future life will be in
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his favour, will naturally wish that there may be such a state, and will therefore overlook deficiencies in the evidence for it. Admitting this, it is certainly some argument in favour of revelation, that the prejudices of the virtuous are for it, and those of the vicious against it; and a state of absolute indifference to a question of this magnitude is impossible. It is what all men are too nearly interested in.

That *life* is universally considered as a thing of great value, is evident from the care of all mankind to preserve it. Consequently, an *everlasting life* must be of infinite value to any person who hopes to enjoy himself in it. A virtuous man, therefore, free from superstition, cannot but ardently wish for it, though persons of a different character, who secretly, at least, suspect that a future life would not be to their advantage, may wish that there was no such thing, for themselves, or others. In this state of mind, especially if they be irritated by controversy on the subject, they may even come not to be able to bear the mention of it without emotions of dissatisfaction and dislike, which will extend to all who believe and rejoice in it; and what

is a frequent, though not a necessary consequence, they may take great pains to destroy that faith in others. On the other hand, a christian, hoping for a future life for himself, wishes it for all other persons, and considers with compassion those who are destitute of so cheering a persuasion, and will earnestly endeavour to impart it to them.

But admitting that a good man will be prejudiced in favour of the arguments for a future state, and consequently in favour of christianity, it may not only be said that the interest he feels in the question will induce him to be scrupulous in his examination of it; but that the situation of the best of men is such, that their hopes and wishes will not lay so great a bias on their minds, as that which affects vicious persons in a contrary way.

Such is the advantage which things *seen* have over things *unseen*, in consequence of the commerce of the world continually obtruding the former upon our attention, that a tendency to believe in a future state will generally be less than a tendency to unbelief; since, as Hartley justly observes, Vol. ii. p.

331, "vividness of ideas tends to unite the subject and predicate of propositions sooner and closer." Our ideas of a future state, according to christianity, are at best general and indistinct, so as not to lay much hold on the imagination, like those of the paradise of Mahomet. According to him, the joys of heaven are definite enough, and therefore more likely to excite vivid ideas. But this is not the religion that I am defending.

SECTION III.

OF THE NECESSARY CONSEQUENCE OF AN ACQUAINTANCE WITH THE SCRIPTURES, AND OF A CANDID AND IMPARTIAL ATTENTION TO THEM.

THE various obstacles to a candid and impartial reading of the scriptures, explained in the preceding Section, are much to be lamented, since nothing else seems to be wanting to the conversion of all unbelievers. Could they but read the historical parts of the

old and new testaments with a reasonable share of candour and impartiality, it would be impossible but that their minds must be impressed with a persuasion of their truth; they bear so many internal marks of it. No person reading the books of Moses, the life of Christ, or the acts of the apostles, with due attention, and with a sufficient knowledge of ancient history and of human nature, can believe such men to have been impostors. The opinion he could not but conceive of their excellent characters, for piety, benevolence, and integrity, would repel every idea of the kind, whatever difficulties he might find in reconciling some parts of the narrative with others; difficulties, however, such as we find in all histories written by different persons. And this favourable impression concerning the character of the scripture historians, and the persons whose history they write, would prepare the mind for a serious and candid examination of the external evidence, which would presently appear superior to that of any other history whatever.

But by persons previously disposed to cavil, the most important considerations are frequently

quently overlooked, and therefore it is impossible that they should make a proper impression on their minds. Otherwise, they could not but be sensible that, in rejecting revealed religion, they subjected themselves to much greater difficulties than they could have found in consequence of receiving it, admitting these to be considerable. If Moses was an impostor, it must surely appear extraordinary, that, without the advantage of any splendid talents, as those of an orator or a warrior, he should impose upon a whole nation, and make them receive a system of religion and laws to which they always shewed the greatest aversion.

But admitting that a man of superior knowledge should arise in a nation so ignorant as the jews were, he could only have imposed upon them by pretences to *miracles*; and let them be supposed ever so stupid, and to *reason* ever so ill, they certainly had the external *senses* of other men. And if the nature of the miracles of Moses be considered, it must be evident, that it was out of his power, or that of any man, to impose upon others so grossly, as, if the jews were imposed upon at all, they

must have been ; the miracles were upon so large a scale. Let any person only consider the nature, and the magnitude, of the miracles exhibited in Egypt; such as the changing of all the water in the river into blood, or any thing resembling blood; the deaths of the first born, and of the first born only, of man, and of beast too, through the whole extent of the country in one night; the passage of the whole nation through the Red Sea; their hearing the articulate pronunciation of the ten commandments from Mount Sinai; their being fed with manna forty years; with many others; and he must be sensible that the most stupid of mankind could never have been so grossly imposed upon. With respect to the *books* containing an account of these miracles, there is as much evidence of their being written by Moses, and of their being published while the events were recent, as there is of the genuineness and antiquity of any other writings whatever, whether we consider their internal or external evidence.

If it be supposed that the books were written in any latter period, it must be so much the more difficult to account for the
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nation receiving them as ancient and genuine writings, and their submitting to the laws and institutions prescribed in them, during the time of their extreme proneness to idolatry, which certainly continued till the Babylonish captivity; and after this time all attempts to impose upon the nation such books as those of the old testament, must have been in vain. Let a similar attempt be made with respect to any other nation in the world, and let the event determine.

Independently of the difficulty of imposing upon any nation in such a manner as the jews must have been imposed upon, and with respect to facts notoriously true, or notoriously false, there is surely some difficulty in accounting for Moses, or any other jew, delivering such a system of religion and laws, as his books contain, a system so totally different from those of all other neighbouring nations, and so much superior to them, without any superior advantage with respect to genius or education. When all other nations without exception were devoted to the worship of a multiplicity of deities, and practised the most abominable and cruel rites,

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how came Moses alone to teach the doctrine of *one God*, the sole creator and governor of all things, and that he was to be worshipped by rites entirely free from all impurity or cruelty? How came the religion of the Hebrews to be the only one in all antiquity that was favourable to purity of morals, and, what is perhaps more extraordinary still, free from the superstitions of divination, magic, and necromancy, to which all antient nations without exception were addicted? It is an ignorance of nature, or of the real causes of events, that is the parent of all this superstition. But how came Moses, and the jews, to be more knowing in this respect than the egyptians, the greeks, or the romans?

The same and still greater difficulties occur with respect to christianity, and the history of its promulgation, which must be wholly overlooked by unbelievers; and yet, compared with them, all the difficulties that remain upon the minds of christians, considerable as they are confessed to be, are as nothing. If Jesus and the apostles worked no real miracles, how came so many thousands of the nation of the jews, averse as it is

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well known they were to their pretensions, to believe that they did ; when it was at the hazard of every thing dear to them in life, and even of life itself, that they professed their belief ? How were the eyes, the ears, and other senses of those jews who were contemporary with Jesus and the apostles, imposed upon ; as they must have been, if no miracles were really wrought ? For this was not a business of reasoning and *argumentation*, with respect to which it is acknowledged that it might not be difficult for one man to impose upon others.

If it be said that the contemporaries of Jesus and of the apostles were not imposed upon, but that the imposition began at a later period, the difficulty will be much increased : because, whenever the story was told as a thing that took place in *time past*, it must have been well known that no evidence of it existed. If such books as those of the evangelists and the *Acts of the Apostles* were first published at this day, could it be possible to make them be received as antient and genuine writings, authentic and true histories ? And could a single man
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be found, who would risk his liberty, or his life, for his faith in them ?

If the writings of the apostles be spurious, it will not be denied that the epistles of Pliny are genuine ; and from them it appears that christianity was the general belief of the province of Bithynia, and probably of all Asia Minor, in his time. And could this have been the case, if its origin had not been prior to his time, and indeed as early as the evangelical history supposes it to have been ?

If the gospels, and the acts of the apostles, do not contain a true history, the epistles of Paul, Peter, James, and John, must be spurious too. But let any person of common sagacity peruse them, with the least attention, and say, whether they bear any marks of forgery, and whether they do not as strictly correspond to the events and circumstances of the times in which those men lived, as the epistles of Cicero do to the incidents of his life ; and consequently, whether they be not as great a confirmation of the gospel history, as his epistles are of the roman. There cannot be a doubt but that the writers of those epistles, whoever they were, were very different

ferent from one another, and from the author of the Acts of the Apostles. So complex a forgery as this must have been, if it be a forgery, is far beyond the powers of man; and yet the writers discover no marks of superior ability.

But, independently of these difficulties respecting matters of history, how could it have been in the power of a jewish carpenter, with fishermen for his principal assistants and followers, to impose upon the jewish nation and the world, as he did? How came such a person as he to form so sublime and just ideas of God and of virtue, and especially to teach the doctrine of a future state with more distinctness and authority than any man who had ever preceded him? And it must be considered that the doctrine of Jesus on this subject was that of the resurrection of the dead at a future period, a doctrine the most improbable in itself, and fundamentally different from the doctrine of the soul surviving the body, on which principle only the heathen philosophers taught a future state. How came this jewish carpenter and his followers to effect such a revolution in the religious system of all

all the civilized part of the world, as had never been attempted, or thought of, by any man before him ?

Are not these difficulties, and many others might be added to them, of a very serious nature? and yet they do not seem to have occurred to the generality of unbelievers. Indeed, they seem not to have had a sufficient knowledge of facts in antient history to be apprized of them; and the few who have mentioned, or alluded to, any of them, do not appear to have considered them with attention, as becomes philosophers, but to have contented themselves with giving the most superficial and unsatisfactory answers; ascribing the belief of the miracles above mentioned to the general *credulity of mankind*. But, in other cases, men do not content themselves with assigning general causes for particular effects. And, credulous as men sometimes are, they cannot be made to believe *any thing*, especially things which they have no predisposition to believe, and by persons to whom they are not previously disposed to give credit. A cause should be assigned for their credulity in every particular case. For every specific effect

effect must have a specific cause; the human mind being subject to as regular laws as any thing else in nature.

But while these considerations are not attended to, the scripture history will necessarily appear as fabulous as the popish legends; the circumstances of difference, though so great, being wholly overlooked by the reader,

SECTION IV.

OF CAUSES OF INFIDELITY NOT UNFAVOURABLE TO THE MORAL CHARACTER, AND A METHOD OF JUDGING WHEN THEY OPERATE.

IN general, I doubt not, the inattention of unbelievers to such considerations as those above mentioned arises from something in their character, and habits of life, unfavourable to them; habits which render them averse to the doctrines and precepts of revealed religion, so that they secretly wish they may not be true. But the same effect may be produced from a turn of mind which leads men

men to look at the dark side of every thing, and to fear, and suspect, that every thing they wish to be true may prove false. In that state of mind, they will always incline to dwell on the objections to revealed religion, rather than on the direct evidence for its truth; and the consequence of this attention to the one in preference to the other, may be a state of scepticism and incredulity; and thus some very worthy and well-disposed persons may class with unbelievers. But they are comparatively few.

That this is a very possible case, we see with respect to other things. How many persons are there in circumstances in which any stranger would conclude that they must be happy, and have great enjoyment of themselves; and yet, for want of *attending* to these circumstances, and by perpetually dwelling upon things that are unfavourable to them, they are far from being happy? On the contrary, they are continually complaining; at the same time that the things they complain of, appear to all their friends to be very inconsiderable.

From whatever turn of mind it be that persons are led to give more attention to the ob-

objections to revelation than to the evidences for its truth, they will lean to the side of scepticism and infidelity. But, in the eye of reason, and of God, infidelity arising from these very different *causes* will be regarded in a very different light. In some it will be an argument of profligacy; in others, of anxiety and timidity.

That the infidelity of Mr. Volney, and probably that of many other persons in France, has arisen from inattention, and gross ignorance, whatever was the cause of it, is evident to every person in the least conversant with antient history. For he supposes that no such person as Jesus Christ ever existed. Whereas, had he been at all acquainted with the history of the times in which christianity was promulgated, whether written by christians or others, he could have had no more doubt of the existence of Jesus Christ, whatever he had thought of his miracles, than of that of Julius Cæsar. It is as much in vain to argue with such a person as this, as with a Chinese, or even a Hottentot. Many unbelievers will say, and I doubt not with truth, that they have read both the scrip-

scriptures themselves and the best defences of revelation that have been recommended to them, and yet see no reason to believe in it. To this nothing can be replied, but that in the states of mind that I have described, it is impossible for them to give what deserves to be called a *due* attention to any just representation of things. The words in which they are expressed may be heard, or read, but the mind may be so pre-occupied, that it shall be impossible for them to make their proper impression; and the best arguments may be no sooner heard, or read, than they shall be entirely forgotten, or wholly neglected, so that they shall have no more *effect*, than if they had never been presented to the mind at all.

The possibility of wholly overlooking things, even with the eyes open, and the object immediately before them, we see in persons who are searching for particular plants, or other objects, among things of a similar nature. A hundred things may come in view in the course of this search, but, not being particularly noticed, the person, who nevertheless *must* have seen them, shall not be
able

able to recollect his having seen them at all. The same is the case with a person who peruses a book with a particular view, or a particular bias upon his mind. He does not see, at least he does not regard, any thing but what he is purposely looking for, and wishes to find; and yet he may not be conscious to himself of any partiality or bias at all. In this case it is hardly possible for the mind to perceive its own delusion, and there seems to be no remedy for it.

It is, however, every man's interest, and therefore should be his endeavour, to keep his mind as free from prejudice as possible, in order that every truth may meet with no obstruction to its reception with him; and I think the following consideration may, perhaps, be of some use to enable a person to distinguish whether his mind be under any unfavourable prejudice with respect to revealed religion, or not.

Whatever appears advantageous to us, we naturally wish to obtain. Now to a virtuous and well-disposed mind, the desire of having his existence continued, that he may see more and more of the admirable system of which

he forms a part, and enjoy his being with increasing advantage, is surely unavoidable, if any thing be so. He will, therefore, naturally *wish* that christianity, which alone holds out this glorious prospect to virtuous men, should be true. It cannot, if it be duly considered, appear to be a matter of indifference to any man, like a mere speculative truth, a proposition in geometry, or algebra, in which he has no interest. Also, every person must *know* whether he has this wish or not. For if he duly apprehend the great object, he must have a very earnest wish that christianity may be true; and if he do give up the belief of it, it will be with sensible regret.

Now it appears to me, that few of the unbelievers that I have ever conversed with, have any concern about the matter, or rather they wish that christianity may not be true. For they rejoice, and triumph, in every seeming refutation of it. I therefore conclude, that they are in such a state of mind as inclines them to wish that it may not be true, probably from suspecting that they should be rather losers than gainers, in consequence of it.

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They therefore prefer even annihilation to the prospect of that future state of retribution which christianity holds out to them; and from a dislike of the subject, they apply to other studies, and engage in other pursuits, which entirely preclude all attention to this, though, in itself, certainly the most important, and the most interesting, of all others.

To a person of a thoughtful and speculative turn of mind, capable of enlarged and extensive views of things, the scriptures present such an idea of the conduct of providence, as he cannot abandon without peculiar regret. To an unbeliever in christianity and a future state, the ways of God, if he believe in any God at all, must appear exceedingly dark. He neither knows how things came into being, nor to what they tend; and his own personal interest and importance in the great scheme is as nothing. But revelation opens a great, a glorious, and most animating prospect, and one in which every individual has the greatest personal interest. We are there informed concerning the origin of the human race, of their final destination, and of many particulars of the vast plan of providence, including

cluding the divine missions of Moses, and of Christ, the great object of which was to form men to virtue here, and to happiness hereafter.

We also learn in the scriptures, that all the evils of life, the contemplation of which cannot but perplex and distress the serious unbeliever, are only a part of that discipline which is necessary to the great end above mentioned. We therefore see the hand, the benevolent hand, of God, in every thing; and, though in a state of trouble and persecution, can *go on our way rejoicing*. In the history of revelation, we see the attention which God has given to men, in affording them light by degrees, and as they were able to bear it; instructing them more or less from the beginning of the world, giving them more distinct and important lessons by Moses and the prophets, and completing the whole scheme by Christ and the apostles.

By the light of revelation we have the pleasing prospect of the gradual improvement of the whole human race, in their progress from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge, and from a state of barbarity and
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perpetual hostility, to a state of universal peace, virtue, and happiness, in which we are assured that this world is to terminate.

Now, what has an unbeliever to contemplate in comparison with these, and other great views which revelation holds out to us, the contemplation of which tends to elevate and ennoble the mind, so as to make a man a superior kind of being to a person who has no knowledge or belief of them? I cannot help concluding, therefore, that a man who voluntarily shuts his eyes to this prospect, must have a strong bias upon his mind, and of a very unworthy kind; and if he does it involuntarily, and with regret, he will not do it without great hesitation, and the most sensible concern.

Let the unbeliever then be ingenuous, and say, whether he really *feels* this concern, or not. If he be insensible to the great views I have mentioned, I shall conclude that his mind is in a low and degraded state; and that, whatever else he may know, he is destitute of the very elements of a right judgment in *this* case, and must be left to his own' delusions. On the whole, I cannot help concluding with

Dr. Hartley (*Observations on Man*, vol. ii. p. 190), that "notwithstanding the great prevalence of infidelity, in modern times, it is seldom found to consist with an accurate knowledge of ancient history, sacred and profane, and never with an exalted piety and devotion to God."

SECTION V.

OF THE KIND OF OBJECTIONS THAT HAVE BEEN MADE TO DIVINE REVELATION.

IF we consider the objections that have been made to revelation by the most celebrated unbelievers, we shall find them to be of such a nature, as to imply no great attention to the subject, or such an examination as historical evidence necessarily requires. By some *prescriptive* * arguments, which may be form-

* Terrullian wrote a treatise entitled, *De Prascriptione*, in which, without considering the arguments of the heretics of his time, he endeavoured to prove that they could not be in the right, as their tenets were not held in the churches that were founded by the apostles.

ed in a very short time, they save themselves the trouble of that accurate inquiry into the state of facts, which cannot be made without time and patience, but which the discussion of the evidences of revelation absolutely requires.

The great question between believers and unbelievers in revelation, is, whether it was possible, consistently with the principles of human nature, as we now find them, and as we must all take it for granted they ever have been, for such numbers of persons as the whole jewish nation consisted of at their departure from Egypt, and so many thousands of jews at Jerusalem at the time of the promulgation of christianity, as were then converted to it, to have believed the miracles recorded in the scriptures, when they required nothing more than the evidence of the senses, and when they had every motive that men could have to ascertain the truth of the facts, and yet that there should have been no truth in them. This, the believer says, would be a greater miracle than any that the history of revelation supposes. Now the solution of this problem has never been attempted by

unbelievers. Nor, indeed, has the case itself been properly noticed by them; having contented themselves with ascribing this great effect, in a random and arbitrary manner, to the credulity of mankind, without endeavouring to shew that, in any similar circumstances, mankind have discovered the same credulity. This will appear if we consider, as I briefly shall do, the general turn of their arguments.

1. Many unbelievers, and especially Mr. Hume, without pretending to examine any historical evidence, have satisfied themselves with saying, that miracles being contrary to our own experience, all accounts of them must be false. But this is easily shewn to be no true state of the case, since events may take place occasionally, which do not happen always; so that miracles might have been wrought in the time of Moses, and of Christ, and not at this day. There is no contradiction in this, since both may be true. All that can in reason be said is, that miracles being unusual appearances, and not analogous to any that fall under our own observation, they require more definite evidence than ordinary facts. But accounts of them should
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not be rejected without a due examination of the evidence alleged for them.

What would philosophers say, if, upon the publication of any new fact, or appearance in nature, no attention should be paid to the evidence produced in favour of it, but it should be treated as a thing that was impossible *à priori*, and therefore undeserving of examination? Many phenomena in nature appear at first sight to be inconsistent, as those of magnetism and electricity, and many in chemistry, with the laws of gravitation, which are not so in reality, and only shew that we had been too hasty in drawing general conclusions, which now require to be modified, the facts in both the cases being unquestionable.

2. Most unbelievers have endeavoured to prove that, without any examination of the particular facts, on which the truth of the jewish and christian revelations rest, we may take it for granted, that those religions *cannot* be true; being, as they conceive, in several respects, unworthy of God, and inconsistent with the dictates of natural religion.

But what do we know of nature, or the
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author of nature, except from facts? The first thing, therefore, that is to be done, is to inquire into the truth of the facts; and if the evidence be sufficient to establish *this*, we must leave the question of their consistency, or inconsistency, with other facts to subsequent discussion, however we may be induced, by any new appearances, to correct the conclusions we may have drawn from preceding ones.

Deductions concerning the moral attributes of God from the works of nature, are by no means so easy, and certain, as from facts in the history of his transactions with men; and there is no process of investigation so familiar to the mind, as that by which we judge of human testimony. How then can we be authorised to say that what is fully ascertained, by indisputable evidence, to have been actually done, or said, by the divine being (evidenced by such works as only the author of nature could do), is inconsistent with any thing that the mere light of nature teaches us concerning him?

In fact, they who reject revelation on this pretence, first form an idea of the supreme being

being from their own imaginations, and not from the productions of nature, and then conclude that certain things ascribed to him in the scripture history are unworthy of him. But if the history be sufficiently authenticated, the seemingly anomalous parts in the divine conduct should be treated like similar anomalies in natural appearances, and in the conduct of providence ; leading us only to limit and modify former conclusions, which were before too general. At least, they should not be at once given up as false, but be considered as *difficulties* on which future observations may throw some light.

But that the moral character of the divine being, as deduced from revelation, is, on the whole, taking the great outline of it, free from all reasonable objection, is what no person can deny. Nothing is more clearly inferred from the light of nature, than what we learn in the scriptures concerning the author of nature, *viz.* that God is *one*; that he is himself the maker and governor of all things; that he is infinitely powerful, wise, and good; that he is a being of the strictest veracity; that he is merciful to the penitent; that he is a lover
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of virtue and a hater of vice; and that he will reward the one and punish the other, if not in this life, yet surely in another. It is impossible to read the scriptures in the most superficial manner, without forming this idea of God; and a thousand doubts concerning the rectitude or the goodness of God will arise from considering the works of nature, for one that can occur to the most prejudiced person concerning any of the moral attributes of God from the history of revelation.

The general inferences, therefore, above mentioned, should remain with us (even more than the belief of the goodness of God from the works of nature), whatever we may be able to make of some particular circumstances which seem to be at variance with them. But it appears to me, that all the objections that have been made of this kind (the principal of which relates to the extermination of the Canaanites) are easily and satisfactorily answered. However, the objection to the whole of revelation from an attention to particular objectionable parts, requires no time, or labour of examination, and supposes only the most superficial knowledge.

3. Other

3. Other persons become unbelievers from seeing such doctrines maintained by believers, as they find to be contrary to common sense; and such abuses of other kinds, as they find in all the civil establishments of christianity, and which are highly injurious to civil society; taking it for granted that such doctrines, and such abuses, are authorised by the christian religion. They more particularly revolt at the doctrine of *transubstantiation*, held by all catholics, and that of the *trinity*, by most protestants, and at the excessive power assumed by the popes, and indeed by priests of most christian communions. But, surely, in a matter of this moment, every man ought, at least, to take the pains to see with his own eyes, and to judge, by the rules of fair criticism, whether such doctrines be contained in the scriptures, and whether such abuses be authorised by Christ and the apostles.

4. It has hitherto been unfortunately maintained by almost all christians, that the scriptures are divinely inspired; and this being assumed by unbelievers, every impropriety of sentiment in the writers, and the slightest contradictions in the history, sufficiently authorise

thorise them, as they think, to reject the whole. But they should, at least, see whether the writers *pretend* to such inspiration, which they evidently do not; or, if they did, they might be mistaken with respect to that circumstance, as they give no evidence of it, and the history be in the main as authentic as any other whatever.

In all these cases, a person taking it for granted that revelation *cannot* be true, takes no pains to inform himself concerning the evidence of the facts, which would require much reading, and patient investigation, and consequently much *time*. He does not so much as read the scriptures themselves, or only looks into them in the most superficial manner; so that, besides knowing nothing of the external evidence, he has no perception of that internal evidence, which could not fail to strike a diligent and impartial reader.

The only unbeliever who appears to me to have had any idea of the true state of the question between believers and unbelievers, is Mr. Gibbon. Being acquainted with history, he saw no reason to entertain any doubt with respect to the circumstances in which
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christianity is said to have been promulgated in the Gospels, and the Acts of the Apostles, and consequently the rapidity with which it spread through the most distant provinces of the Roman empire. He could not deny the remarkable fact, that a few unlearned men, of a despised nation, conceived such ideas respecting the enlightening and reforming of the world, as had never occurred to the greatest philosophers of the most celebrated nations, and that they succeeded in the bold design, having propagated the new religion with unexampled success in the learned and civilized, as well as the unlearned and uncivilized, parts of the world, and this notwithstanding the greatest sufferings to which they and their followers were universally exposed; so that there could not have been wanting any motive to the most rigorous examination of the facts on which it was founded, and while they were all recent. He therefore thought it necessary to give his ideas of the causes of this wonderful event. For he could not but be sensible, that every effect requires an adequate cause. But the lameness of his account betrays the most extreme

treme prejudice, amounting to a total incapacity of forming a right judgment in the case.

Mr. Gibbon with great seriousness ascribes the rapid spread of christianity chiefly to the zeal of its advocates, the strictness of their discipline, and the promises of happiness in another world, which the new religion held out to men. But this is no more than, with the Indian, placing the world upon the elephant, without knowing that the elephant was supported by the tortoise. For he gives no account at all of the cause of the great zeal of the primitive christians, of the strictness of their discipline, or how so many persons were induced to believe these flattering promises of future happiness, so as to live and die in the firm belief of it. Consequently, the great difficulty of the ready reception of the gospel, and the rapid spread of christianity, without being supported by miracles, remains just as he found it, that is, wholly unaccounted for. The gospel history clearly accounts for every thing that took place. But if that history be false, if no miracles were ever wrought, the
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belief of those miracles, by persons so indisposed to the reception of christianity as both the jews and gentiles of that age evidently were, was absolutely impossible, on any known principles of human nature. Consequently, a much greater miracle is in reality admitted by unbelievers, than any that the gospel history supposes, and a miracle without any rational object whatever.

It is common with many unbelievers to say that such is the power of *priests*, that they can impose any religion on the *vulgar*, and that to such influence may be ascribed the belief of the jewish and christian miracles. As I have much to observe on this subject, I shall consider it in a separate section.

To me there cannot be any clearer proof of the insufficiency of the grounds on which the generality of unbelievers reject christianity, than the extraordinary impression that has been made, especially in America, by Mr. Paine's *Age of Reason*. For there is not, perhaps, as I think I have shewn in my remarks upon it, any book of the kind which abounds with more palpable mistakes with respect to notorious facts, or with reasoning

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more manifestly inconclusive. At the same time such rational and excellent defences of christianity as that of Mr. Paley's, to say nothing of other publications which have the same object, are comparatively read by very few, and serve only (which is all that I expect from this performance) to confirm the faith of some christians, without bringing back any that have once declared their disbelief of christianity.

SECTION VI.

OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN PRIESTS WITH RESPECT TO THEIR POWER OF IMPOSING UPON THE COMMON PEOPLE.

WHEN unbelievers in revelation are asked how the jews and christians were brought to believe the miracles of Moses and of Christ, if no such miracles were wrought, they frequently say, that it is in the power of *priests* to make the common people believe any thing, and that we see this in all countries, and
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in all ages. But this assertion, besides being too general, does not at all apply to the case of *jewish* or *christian* priests.

In all the cases in which priests have had the most influence, and seem to have led the common people, the people were previously disposed to believe what they were taught by them; the superstitions to which they were addicted (arising from an ignorance of the laws of nature) having been common to the whole nation, the priests as well as the people themselves. All the heathen religions existed, as far as appears, before any particular institution of a priesthood to administer the rites of them. The priests of Greece and Rome, of whose functions and powers we have the most knowledge, were in no important respect wiser than the rest of the people; nor indeed were their offices distinct from, or incompatible with, civil offices: Julius Cæsar and Agricola were priests, and Cicero an augur. What knowledge, then, could there have been peculiar to the priests, of which they could have availed themselves to impose upon the rest of the people, if they had had any interest distinct from theirs?

It appears from Herodotus that in the early ages, princes, priests, and people were alike ignorant and superstitious; and when the light of philosophy beamed upon Greece and Rome, the newly-acquired knowledge was by no means peculiar to priests, or gave them any umbrage, as if any secrets they had were in danger from it. Some of the wisest and most learned of the antients were as much devoted to the popular superstitions as the vulgar. This was evidently the case with the emperors Marcus Aurelius, and Julian.

If we attend to the circumstances of barbarous nations, such as the Tartars, or North-American Indians, we shall not find their priests in possession of any more real knowledge than the people. They are equally ignorant and superstitious, firmly believing in the efficacy of their various charms, and other ceremonies. Or, if they have recourse to any artifice, it is, there is reason to think, only to obtain greater credit to what they believe to be fundamentally entitled to it; and from this use of artifice too few persons of any country or of any religion, have had
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the just firmness entirely to abstain. More, I doubt not, of the tricks of the Romish priests and monks were the contrivance of sincere believers, than of unbelievers.

The common people are said to be credulous, and accordingly easily imposed upon. But this is only true in cases in which they are, from their prejudices, previously disposed to credulity. For where the things that are endeavoured to be imposed upon them are contrary to their preconceived prejudices and habits, they are always incredulous and obstinate in proportion to their ignorance; and accordingly they have always been the last persons in every country to adopt any new opinion or practice. This was particularly evident in the progress of christianity. For the people of the villages were so much later than others in abandoning their antient superstitions, that the term *pagans* (*pagani*) became synonymous to *heathens*; the inhabitants of the cities, better informed, and more open to conviction, having changed their opinions and customs long before them.

With respect to the jewish and christian

religions, it was absolutely impossible that their establishment could have received the least aid from priestcraft, since they were established before any such orders of men as priests existed; and besides, in both the cases, the prejudices of the people at large were directly opposed to them. The splendid miracles wrought in Egypt, the passage through the Red Sea, and the delivery of the ten commandments from mount Sinai, preceded any appointment of priesthood among the jews; and the posterity of Moses, who was the principal instrument in all the religious institutions of the Hebrews, were not priests, but were included in the class of common Levites. Besides, what knowledge had Moses or Aaron more than the other chiefs of the nation, and how could it have been in their power to make that refractory people receive a system of religion which they evidently did not like, and to believe things to be true, the falsehood of which, if they were false, they must themselves have been witnesses to? The rebellion against Moses and Aaron demonstrates that the rest of the people were not previously disposed

posed to respect them, any more than the miracles wrought in their favour compelled them to do it.

That the great mass of the Hebrew nation were exceedingly indisposed to the religious institutions of Moses, and that they preferred the rites of the neighbouring nations, is evident from the whole of their history till the time of the Babylonish captivity. When Moses only stayed longer on mount Sinai than they expected, they made the figure of a calf, after the manner of the Egyptians, for the object of their worship, though they had just before been expressly forbidden to do any such thing; and their relapses into the idolatrous rites of their neighbours, notwithstanding repeated judgments calculated to wean them from them, continued till the period above mentioned.

The priests of Baal, not those of Jehovah, had the advantage of the prejudices of the people in their favour; and in several reigns the authority of the kings and of the nobles was added to it. In the reign of Manasseh the worship of Baal was set up in the temple itself. How then could it have been in the

power of the few and persecuted prophets of Jehovah to supplant them, and re-establish a mode of worship to which the generality of the people were so extremely averse, but by the power of miracles? If there be any fact in history more clearly established than any other, it is this, of the proneness of the Hebrew nation to the idolatrous rites of their neighbours; and yet, after their captivity in Babylon, when they saw the complete overthrow of that state, which was more addicted to idol-worship than any other in the whole world, and the fulfilment of the prophecies of Moses and Jeremiah, both in their own punishment, and in their deliverance, they reverted to the observance of their religion, when it was most natural to expect they would entirely have abandoned and forgotten it; and they have not swerved from the firmest attachment to it to this day.

All the knowledge of which the Jewish priests were possessed was contained in the books of their law, which were equally open to all the people, and which were recited to them every seventh year at the feast of tabernacles. In the heathen religions there were *mysteries*,
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and *secrets*, but in that of the jews there were none.

Had the jewish priests been a body of men, who, like the jesuits, filled up the vacancies of their own corps, there might have been a succession of able men among them, capable of imposing upon, and leading the common people; but as the jewish priesthood was hereditary, and ability is not so, many of them must have been weak men, who would probably have divulged any secrets, if there had been any in the order.

Besides, in times of degeneracy, many of the jewish priests, as well as of the people, apostatized to the worship of other gods; and the prophets denounced the heaviest judgments against them on that account, so that they had every motive to expose a fraud if they had known of any. But nothing of this kind appears, any more than in the case of Judas with respect to Christ. Notwithstanding the frequent apostacies of the bulk of the Hebrew nation (in which princes, priests, and people were equally involved) from the worship of their own God, it by no means appears that they at any time disbelieved the miracles

miracles recorded in the books of Moses; but, like all other people in those times, they were willing to believe that the claims of different deities were not wholly incompatible with each other, and the religious festivals and rites of their neighbours were far more alluring than their own. And how common is it for men's practice, and even their reason, to bend to the side of inclination?

With less pretence can it be said that priestcraft was concerned in the promulgation of christianity. That the jews in general were indisposed to receive the new religion, can never be questioned. We see the most inveterate prejudice against it in that nation to this day; and what advantage could such a man as an illiterate carpenter, and a few fishermen, have over the jewish scribes and priests? Neither Jesus nor the apostles were priests, or possessed of any more knowledge than other persons of their low station in their country. Indeed, no case can be stated, in which men had less natural advantage for imposing upon others than they had.

The truth of christianity being once established by unquestionable miracles, and such a

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rigorous scrutiny of all the facts on which it rested, as no other facts ever underwent, and an order of priesthood being founded upon it, worldly-minded men, becoming priests, took advantage, no doubt, of the popular credulity to promote their own interest. But this was long after the establishment of christianity, and therefore is to be ascribed to the *abuses* of it, and not to the thing itself, the true principles of which may be seen in the New Testament ; and it is evident they afford no just ground for any such abuses, the whole object of christianity being to train men up to virtue here and happiness hereafter. Nothing is easier than to trace the rise and progress of the influence of priests among christians, and the whole of it was unquestionably subsequent to the promulgation of christianity; so that to ascribe the establishment of this religion to priestcraft, is to mistake the effect, and an accidental and late effect, for the cause.

SECTION VII.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON THE PREVALENCE
OF INFIDELITY.

ARDENTLY as the zealous christian must wish for the extension of his religion, and the universal prevalence of those principles which he conceives calculated to enlighten his own mind, to cheer his heart under all the vicissitudes of life, and to give him hope even in death, and much as he will, consequently, lament the prevalence of principles which have an opposite tendency, yet, upon a more extensive view of the subject, he will see no reason to be disturbed, or alarmed, at the present aspect of things.

Having no doubt of the truth of his religion, he is confident that it will finally prevail, and by its own evidence, when it comes to be attended to, bear down all opposition. It will be sufficiently evident to all impartial persons, even those who have not the leisure, or the means, of entering into the historical investigation themselves, that the truly intelligent, the inquisitive, the candid, and the virtuous, will

will be the friends of revelation; and that the firm belief of it tends to form a character superior to that of unbelievers, inspiring a dignity and elevation of mind incompatible with any thing mean or base.

The true christian, having a constant respect to God, a providence, and a future state, feels himself less interested in the things that excite the avarice, the ambition, and other base passions of men; and consequently his mind, elevated by devotion, more easily expands itself into universal benevolence, and all the heroic virtues that are connected with it. The christian, believing that every thing under the government of God will have a glorious termination in universal virtue and universal happiness, easily yields himself the willing instrument in the hands of providence, for so great a purpose; and considering himself as, with the apostle, *a worker together with God*, he will live a life of habitual devotion, and benevolence; sentiments which are inconsistent with a propensity to sensual and irregular indulgence.

On the other hand, the generality of unbelievers will appear to be persons to whom the
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subject of religion is, on some account or other, unpleasant, who, therefore, give but little attention to it, or to its evidences; and therefore cannot be deemed competent judges of them, whatever be their ability, or knowledge, in other respects. A great proportion of them, it cannot be denied, are also profligate, and licentious in their manners; and seldom or never looking to God, or a providence, they must have their views greatly contracted, and of course shew other symptoms of a little and narrow mind.

If any person will say that the principles of christianity tend not to elevate, but to debase, the human character, I cannot help, from my own very different views of things, concluding his mind is under some very improper influence, such as prevents his forming a true judgment in one of the clearest of cases. If he be capable of understanding *Hartley's Theory of the Mind*, he may see what I have advanced on this subject demonstrated, as far as any thing relating to the affections of the mind is capable of demonstration. He may see the pleasures of *sensation, imagination, ambition, self-interest, sympathy, theopathy*, and the

the *moral-sense*, rise in due gradation, and the three last mentioned to coalesce, and absorb the former, as the human character advances in excellence; the consequence of which is a capacity for higher and more durable gratifications with respect to a man's self, and superior qualifications, and dispositions, for communicating happiness to others.

Also, the great views opened to us in revelation, and in revelation only, are necessary, as I have shewn in my *Discourses on the Evidences of Revealed Religion*, to enlarge the comprehension of the human mind, and thereby to give us the same kind of superiority over other men, that men in general have over brutes. Unbelievers in revelation and a future state will have little inducement to think of God, or of a providence; and consequently, with very few exceptions, they become not only practical, but speculative atheists. It is impossible, therefore, that they should attain that state of *habitual devotion*, or that constant regard to God, that lively sense of his intimate presence with them, and government over them, which is necessary to great excellence of character,
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and which has an intimate connexion with the most disinterested and active benevolence*.

I am far, however, from being unwilling to acknowledge, that there are many persons, of whose understandings I have the highest opinion, but whose objects of attention have been wholly different from mine, who will be so far from concurring with me in this opinion, of the superiority of the christian character, that they will treat it with contempt; and unless all their habits of living and thinking, which go together, could be reversed, there is no prospect of leading them to entertain different ideas. In this case there is no remedy. We must continue to differ. They will make light of my opinion on the subject, and I shall consider them with compassion; hoping, however, that in a future period of their existence, even *they* will come to feel and think as I do, and that we shall all see reason to rejoice in reflecting on the wonderful, but eventually successful,

* See my two *Discourses on habitual devotion and the duty of not living to ourselves*—in a volume of discourses on various subjects.

methods, by which such a glorious catastrophe will have been brought about.

In this view of it, christianity will serve to discriminate the characters of men. Though I would be far from involving all unbelievers in this censure, it will in general be chearfully embraced by the worthiest and the best of men, and it will be the means of making them worthier and better, while it will be rejected by the unworthy; and this rejection, accompanied with a less restrained indulgence of their appetites, and their giving with more eagerness into a variety of worldly pursuits, will tend to debase their character still more. And, from the knowledge that I have of men, it is evident to me that this is the case in fact.

That christianity should have this twofold effect, is not extraordinary. It is necessarily the case, in the wise plan of providence, with every other means of virtuous improvement. Neither prosperity nor adversity are ever sent in vain, never leaving any man as they found him, but always making him either better or worse. Prosperity may either make a man

more grateful to God, and more benevolent to man; or it may make him proud, insolent, and unfeeling; and adversity may either make him humble and resigned, or fretful, peevish, and malevolent.

The intelligent christian will likewise see a valuable purpose answered by the present prevalence of infidelity. It is a striking fulfilment of the prophecies of our Saviour, who, though he foretold that his church should never fail, likewise intimated that, at his second coming, he should not find much faith (or a general belief and expectation of his coming) in the earth. It is likewise a confirmation of what the apostles have written concerning the apostacy of the latter days. In the mean time, the prevalence of infidelity is the most efficacious means of purifying our religion from the abuses and corruptions which at present debase it, and especially of overturning the civil establishments of christianity in all christian countries, whereby the kingdom of Christ has been made a kingdom of this world, having been made subservient to the corrupt policy of men, and in every respect the reverse of what it originally was.

Thus

Thus are unbelievers employed by divine providence to reform the christian church. They will do it far more effectually than any of its friends would have done ; and this will pave the way for its universal prevalence hereafter. Thus the corruptions and abuses of christianity produce infidelity, and this infidelity is the means, in the wise order of providence, of the complete cure of those corruptions and abuses, with only a temporary and partial injury to that religion, of which they are so great an incumbrance.

SECTION VIII.

ADVICE TO RATIONAL CHRISTIANS RESPECTING THE PRESENT PREVALENCE OF INFIDELITY.

AS I intend this publication for the use of *christians*, and the circumstances in which we find ourselves, are in a great measure new, and peculiarly interesting, I shall close the work with some advice respecting

our conduct in them, and I shall comprise the whole under four heads.

1. In this state of the open rejection of christianity by so many persons of the most conspicuous characters, it is the peculiar duty of every christian to make the most open profession of his religion, without being moved by the apostacy of ever so great a number, or the obloquy, or ridicule, to which he may be exposed on that account; remembering the awful denunciation of our Saviour, Matth. viii. 28, *Whoever shall be ashamed of me, and of my words, of him also will the son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his father, with the holy angels.*

In order to make this open profession of christianity to the most advantage, it is necessary that christians should assemble for the purpose of *public worship*, though in the smallest numbers; letting it be known that there is such worship, and that others may attend if they please. A christian who is not known to be such except by the general uprightness of his conduct, will, no doubt, be respected, but not as a christian. It will not be known on what principles he acts, and there-

therefore others will be but little wiser or better by his means. But a christian church, a number of persons regularly meeting as such, to encourage and edify one another, reading the scriptures, and administering christian ordinances, is, as our Saviour said, *a city set on an hill, which cannot be hid; and when our light thus shines before men, others will not only see our good works, but also the principles from which they proceed, and thus be led to glorify our father who is in heaven.* For the same reason, when a spurious and corrupt christianity is most prevalent, the more intelligent christians should separate themselves, and form other societies for public worship, that unbelievers may have an opportunity of judging between them, and not be led to take it for granted that there is no christianity but such as they perhaps justly reject.

2. Every christian should, as far as possible, make himself master of the arguments in favour of his religion, that they may appear not to be governed by a principle of implicit faith, but, as the apostle Peter says (1 Pet. iii. 15), *be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh him a reason of the hope that*

that is in him. And the main argument for the truth of christianity (but from the discussion of which all unbelievers have hitherto shrunk) is very plain and intelligible. It is the certain belief of the great facts on which it is founded, by those who must have known the truth of the case, and who were most nearly interested to ascertain it. If, on such undeniable evidence, it be true, that Christ wrought real miracles, that he died and rose from the dead, the christian religion is true; and we may depend upon it that, according to his repeated declaration, he will come again, to raise all the dead, to judge the world, and to give to every man according to his works (which is all that is of most consequence in christianity), whatever unbelievers may find to object to the system in other respects.

3. But we should most carefully bear in mind, that in the defence of christianity, as in our whole conduct, we should shew a disposition worthy of it. Besides that uniform superiority of mind to this world, which removes us to the greatest distance from every thing mean and base; besides that spirit of habitual devotion, and universal benevolence,
which

which raises the human character to the highest pitch of moral excellence (of the most important elements of which, unbelievers, who have not the enlarged views that christianity opens to us, are necessarily destitute), let our behaviour towards unbelievers themselves be the reverse of what theirs generally is towards christians, and which is so conspicuous in the writings of Voltaire and others. Let there be nothing in it of their sarcastic turn of mind, which implies both contempt and malevolence. Let it be with that *meekness* and *benevolence*, which the apostles so strongly recommended, 1 Pet. iii. 15; 2 Tim. ii. 20. Let every thing we say on the subject, or do with respect to it, discover the greatest goodwill, and friendly concern for those who differ from us, though in a matter of so much consequence. Let us consider them as persons who are unhappily misled by false views of things, and whom, if they be of a candid disposition, a juster view will set right, but whom an angry or contemptuous opposition would irritate, and alienate more than ever.

Let us regard christianity itself as only a

means of virtue, and moral improvement, and therefore let us rejoice if infidelity do not (as however it is too apt to do) lead men into vice. Unbelievers may be men of decent and valuable characters, though destitute of the more sublime virtues which give the greatest dignity to human nature, and fit them in a more eminent manner for the peculiar employment, and the peculiar happiness, of a future state. Let us also indulge the pleasing hope, that hereafter, though not at present, their minds, if not essentially depraved, wanting only that farther *light* which will irresistibly burst upon them hereafter, they will be every thing that we can wish for them, and therefore that, though we differ at present, we shall some time hence rejoice together. We are all brethren, children of the same father; and though differing ever so much in other respects, should regard and love one another as such. Besides, how can we shew our superiority, or greater comprehension of mind, arising from a habit of attending to great and distant objects, and looking beyond ourselves, but by greater meekness, forbearance, candour, and benevolence towards men, as well

as by greater resignation, and habitual devotion with respect to God, and a greater command over our appetites and passions in general?

We should ever bear in mind that superior knowledge implies superior obligations. As to believe in a God, and yet *live as without God in the world*, is worse than being an atheist; so to profess christianity, while its principles have no influence upon us, not improving our dispositions and conduct, is much worse than not to believe it at all. A profligate unbeliever is much more excusable than a worldly-minded immoral christian, a christian destitute of candour and benevolence.

4. Christians surrounded by unbelievers, perhaps without any opportunity of attending public worship, and the received custom of the times excluding the mention of any thing relating to *religion* in conversation, should be careful to confirm and strengthen their own faith by a voluntary attention to the principles and evidences of it. Faith, as Dr. Hartley has shewn, admits of degrees; and between a merely *rational faith*, or the

the simple assent of the mind to a speculative truth, and *practical faith*, or that cordial reception of it which warms the heart, and influences the conduct, the difference is almost infinite. The former, as it respects christianity, is of very little value, as we see in the generality of christians, who being wholly immersed in the affairs of the world, and giving little or no attention to their christian principles, are little, if at all, the better for them. Nay, they are the more criminal on this account; being possessed of so great a treasure, and making no proper use of it. The latter only is that faith which the apostle says, *works by love*, which purifies the heart, and reforms the life; and it cannot be formed and kept up in the actual circumstances of life, without great and unremitted attention.

A person, therefore, who wishes to be a christian to any good purpose, must make it his daily practice to read the scriptures, and other books which tend to interest him in their contents. Much of the time that his necessary business, whatever it be, allows for reading, he will, with peculiar satisfaction, devote to *this*; and he will not satisfy himself
with

with saying that, having once read the scriptures, and well enough remembering their general contents, he has no occasion to look into them any more. The consequence of the frequent reading of the scriptures, and books relating to christianity, will be, that his religion, or something relating to it, will be the subject to which his thoughts will naturally turn, whenever the business of life does not call them another way; and even in the midst of business he will have many moments of pleasing and serious reflection, which will have a happy effect in preserving that equanimity which is so desirable amidst the vicissitudes of this life, preventing undue elation in prosperity, and depression in adversity; from that sense of the wise and impartial providence of God superintending all events, and the happy termination to which all things are tending, which this practice will naturally impress upon his mind.

If a christian have any friends, whose views of things are similar to his own, he will naturally resort to them, and they will strengthen each other's faith, hope, and joy, by conversing on the subject of religion; as persons
of

of the same sentiments and views in politics inflame their ardour in a common cause by frequent intercourse and conversations. I am even not altogether without hope, that this open rejection of christianity by such great numbers, and the contempt with which it is treated by them, will operate like perfection of other kinds, and animate the zeal of its rational and steady friends; and also that this zeal may lead to methods of extending the knowledge of christianity, and its evidences, to others who are but imperfectly acquainted with them, which may end in the *rechristianizing* of the world, and that on principles better founded, and therefore more stable than ever.

But to effect this desirable end, it is necessary, that christians make their religion a primary object, and consider every thing relating to this life as subordinate to it; as, if there be a future life, of so much more value than this, they reasonably ought to do. Let the *children of this world*, as our Saviour calls them, give their whole attention, as they do, to the perishable things of it; but let the *children of light*, the heirs of immortality, habitually

tually look above and beyond it, to that *treasure in heaven which faileth not*, that *inheritance which is incorruptible, undefiled, and which fadeth not away*, not indeed the object of sense, but of faith, and surely *reserved in heaven for us*.

There is no great danger of leading any person by these representations to make his religion too much an object, so as to neglect the proper business of this life; though, with some persons of a peculiarly melancholy turn of mind, and especially after meeting with misfortunes in life, this has been the case. The constant presence of things *seen and temporal* gives them a decided advantage over things *unseen*, though *eternal*, especially in these times, in which all monkish maxims are justly exploded, and the duties of all intelligent christians connect them with the world and the business of it; so that we cannot have any serious apprehension of this inconvenience, which, however, it is proper to guard against. Indeed, I cannot conceive that any of those whom I call *rational christians*, whose religion is free from the gross absurdities that have long prevailed in the christian world, and which

which have brought it into the state of discredit in which it now is, are in any danger of this extreme; and these are the only persons by whom I have any expectation that an address from *me* will be attended to.

Lastly, let the rational christian, who justly disclaims such doctrines as those of *original sin*, *arbitrary predestination*, the *trinity*, and *vicarious satisfaction*, as the grossest corruptions of his religion, and the principal cause of its present rejection (and which on this account his regard for christianity requires that he should take every opportunity of exposing), be equally prepared to meet the too vehement zeal of the defenders of these doctrines (who are at present the great majority of the nominally christian world), persons who will not scruple to treat him as a deist, or atheist; and also the hatred of the real deists and atheists of the age. For if he be zealous and active in promoting what he deems to be pure christianity, their sentiments concerning him will not deserve a softer name. However, the violence and malignity of both are alike insignificant, considering the great object we have in view, and they are infinitely over-

overbalanced by the solid satisfaction which arises from the cordial esteem of a small number of judicious christian friends, who will approve of our conduct, and join us in it; to say nothing of the exquisite delight which arises from the consciousness of a steady and undaunted pursuit of what is *true* and *right*, the hope we entertain of the approbation of our maker, and the glorious reward of immortality.

SECTION IX.

AN ILLUSTRATION OF WHAT IS ADVANCED,
P. 20, CONCERNING THE PRINCIPLE OF
SELF INTEREST.

THOUGH a regard to men's own interest is often the reason why they perform virtuous actions, and consult the good of others, yet a love of others is originally generated in a manner independent of it, and even prior to it, from pleasing sensations in any manner connected with other persons.

A child

A child becomes attached to its nurse, and its parents, from the pleasure it receives from them, and also from the remains of pains falling within the limits of pleasure, according to the observations of Dr. Hartley. He is pleased to see them pleased, from his having had most pleasure himself when he perceived them to be so. This gives him in time a habit of endeavouring to please them. But when this affection and habit is once formed, it is so independent of the elements of which it was composed, that few persons have any idea of the process by which it is generated; and in time the desire to make others happy is as confirmed, and influences us as instantaneously, as the desire of self-preservation, in so much that many philosophers have supposed it to be an original instinct, natural to man, and not generated from any elements after our birth.

This is most evidently the case with brute creatures with respect to their offspring, and certainly without any attention to their own interest or happiness, of which it is probable they never have any idea, always acting from the influence of immediate impressions, without

out any thing that we call reflection. Besides, whatever be the cause, parents are more attached to their children than children are to their parents, and with as little view to any advantage they may receive from them; so that, whatever private pleasure or satisfaction may have had to do in the formation of this affection, it becomes, and very soon, perfectly disinterested; and therefore the same may be, and no doubt is, the case with respect to general benevolence. If you ask a truly benevolent person *why* he is so, he can no more give any account of it, than he can of the reasons why he loves himself; and the attempt to derive it from the principle of self love, will probably appear to him to be very far fetched and improbable.

Few of the actions of men, even the most selfish, have for their immediate and proper motive a regard to their general interest. If this was the case, they would study it more, and act more rationally and wisely than they do. Their only object is the gratification of some propensity; and that of doing good to others, or the principle of benevolence, when it is once formed, acts as instantaneously, and

mechanically, as that of hunger or thirst. At the time, no doubt, it would give a benevolent person more uneasiness to repress his inclination than to indulge it, and therefore he has most satisfaction in acting as he does; and in this sense every action of a man's life may be said to be selfish, and in the nature of things it cannot be otherwise. This is the case not only when men risk, or actually sacrifice, their lives for the good of others, but when they do it from a principle of honour, or the dread of shame. But this is a very different thing from a man's acting with a deliberate view to avoid the pain or procure the pleasure; and if any man can be brought ardently to wish, and steadily to pursue, the good of others, without any regard to his private advantage, though he have the highest gratification in this benevolent conduct, it is the most properly disinterested that can even be imagined. The same observation will apply to the principle of obedience to the will of God, and the dictates of conscience. When these become men's immediate motive of action, and they have no satisfaction equal to that of being uni-

uniformly governed by them, it is the most perfect virtue, and the highest perfection of character, that they can attain to.

The proper rule of *right* with respect to any institution, or piece of workmanship, is the intention of the author of it. The proper conduct of a boy at school, is to conform to the rules of it, which were laid down by the master, with a view to the improvement of his scholars; and that precise number of wheels in a clock, and that disposition of them, is right, which best answers the purpose of the maker of it. For the same reason, therefore, right conduct in men, as beings under the moral government of their maker, is a conformity to his will, it being taken for granted, that his will and object is the happiness of his creatures. A christian being fully persuaded of this, will make this his object, and endeavouring to overlook his individual interest, he will act that part which he conceives his maker, and the good of his fellow-creatures, requires, though it lead to danger, suffering, and even death.

Every intelligent being will, no doubt, consult his own interest, and make this his ulti-

mate object, when he does not act from any particular impression, but from cool reflection. But the christian has a full persuasion that, in his case, it is needless, and even injurious to him; being satisfied that, if he does his duty, he who is a better judge than himself will take the best care of his true interest; and though he abandon every possible advantage in this life, he will find it in another. On the other hand, an unbeliever in a future state, must necessarily have his views bounded by *this*, and if he act from his best reason, he will sacrifice every thing to this life, and the enjoyment of it, because it is his *all*. In this case, however, we see what power a sense of shame, a feeling of patriotism, and other principles (which, being once formed, act mechanically) have, to carry men to despise danger and death, equal, in many cases, to that of the christian martyrs; but they cannot do it with the same certainty, because in the christian there is no opposition between the dictates of his coolest reflection, and any other approved principle of action, whereas with the unbeliever they are much at variance.

Admitting believers and unbelievers to be
governed

governed by the principles of self interest (though the most selfish are by no means uniformly so), the man who with a steady eye can contemplate an interest beyond the grave, and sacrifice every interest he has in this world to it, is a character much superior to him whose views do not go beyond it, as much as the character of a man is superior to that of a child, and for the same reason. He will also more easily enter into other great views, and acquire a greater command of his passions, in which consists the superiority of men to children, and to brutes.

THE END.

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